

CSCH Presidential Address 2007

Biography and Church History

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Biography is one of the most-loved genres within contemporary culture. Its popularity is observable in multiple medias – print, film, and television – and even on the internet, especially if blogs and Wikipedia are at least partially interpreted as biographical in form. Perhaps the prolificacy of biography is partially fueled by the celebrity culture of our day, but whatever the reasons, people are drawn by the stories of other people.

Many biographies focus on politicians, musicians, actors, royalty, and successful (and sometimes disgraced) leaders. Biographies on Albert Einstein and on the young Pierre Elliot Trudeau are current bestsellers, as are numerous biographies on Nelson Mandela.¹ Countless biographies – authorized or so-called non-authorized – have been written on Princess Diana, and popular biographies have been written on people such as Bill Gates, Conrad Black (and Black on Richard Nixon!), Martha Stewart, Bobby Orr, Elvis, and the Beatles. The list could go on and on. Indeed, even the absolutely delightful and heart-rending book, *Marley and Me*, is a biography, even though the central subject is a dog!² “Lighter” or fluffier biographical genre is also observable in the popularity of various tabloids and magazines, such as *People*. Countless biographies are also written especially for children; such books aim to provide children with role models and pictures of virtuous individuals who often accomplish much

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in the face of diversity.³

Biography as a genre is also pervasive in film and television. As with books or other printed materials, the subjects are often politicians, royalty, artists, or “heroes” of some kind. I think of three movies released in 2006 that are biographical in form, namely, *The Queen*, *The Last King of Scotland*, and *Amazing Grace*. But earlier biographical movies have also been quite successful, such as *Gandhi* (1982), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Amadeus* (1989), *Schindler’s List* (1993), *Frida* (2002), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Finding Neverland* (2004), and *Kinsey* (2004). Television augments the genre of biography in contemporary society, with specialty channels such as A & E Biography, Biography Channel-Canada, and popular shows such as CBC’s *Life and Times* (with Ann-Marie MacDonald).

While debates can and will continue to rage as to the historical accuracy and interpretation of biographies in print, film, and television, none of these debates seem to lessen the popularity of biography as a means of informing and perhaps inspiring countless people. It is my purpose today to ponder biography in connection with the discipline of church history, and to think about biography as a method to engage in – and perhaps popularize – our own research on the study of Christianity in Canada in particular.

Before I begin, I must make two disclaimers. First, I am not a biographer and I am not an expert on biography. I say this even though I have written biography and use biography – sometimes extensively – in my research on Christianity and on the study of religion in North America.⁴ Because of my historical interests I have given some thought during the past decade to biography as a genre, but I would describe myself as a historian rather than as a biographer. Second, I do not consider myself a literary expert of any kind, although I do recognize biography when I read it, and I do know the differences between biography, autobiography, and memoir! In my courses, I find students are often quite engaged when they are assigned biographies to read. My remarks, therefore, must be understood as coming from my limited experience as a historian of Christianity and as a university professor who happens to dabble in biography and who finds myself curious about this genre that I use and which is so popular within our culture.

Many of us in the Canadian Society of Church History are not strangers to the genre of biography. Some of us have published books that

may be defined as biography or we have utilized biographical methods within our historical analyses. At the risk of omitting someone's work, I'd like to remind us of some of the more recent biographical monographs published by members of our society – as well as by other writers and scholars – that deal with the topic of Christianity in Canada. Many of these publications focus on particular church, denominational, or academic leaders. In this vein, I think of Mark G. McGowan's recent publication on Michael Power, A. Donald Macleod's book on W. Stanford Reid, Paul Laverdure's book on Brother Reginald, Neil Semple's book on Samuel Nelles, Shirley Jane Endicott's book on her mother, Mary Austin Endicott, Gwen R.P. Norman's book on her father, Richard Roberts, and my own slim contribution on Sister Geraldine MacNamara.⁵ While few of these works deal with what may be called religious activists or non-conformists, some indeed are, including Nancy Knickerbocker on Mildred Osterhout Fahrni, and Barbara Roberts on Gertrude Richardson.⁶

Others of us have written what may be called group or collective biographies. In this category are the books by Marguerite Van Die on the Colbys of Carrolcraft, Marilyn Färdig Whiteley on Methodist women in Canada, and Ruth Compton Brower on Presbyterian women and missions in India.⁷ While biographical dictionaries may also be included as a subset of this category (such as the one that I am currently editing for Westminster John Knox Press on women and religion in North America), such reference works, although biographical, have a different purpose than monographs on select individuals or collective bodies.

It is not surprising that scholars of Christianity – in Canada and throughout the world – utilize biography as a genre to interpret the past. Biography, after all, is firmly rooted within western Christian history and its foundation on Greco-Roman culture. Biographer Nigel Williams, in his recent history of biography, suggests that biography as a genre can be traced back to the cave drawings done by our human ancestors.⁸ Despite its possible pre-historical roots, Plutarch is often referred to as the father of biography; Plutarch wrote on the lives of others as a way to uplift the questions of human morality and ethics. Martyrology developed as a way to remember individuals who laid down their lives for the Christian faith and as a way to organize saint and feast days. Hagiography grew out of martyrology; although today we use this word pejoratively to describe biographical works that idealize or idolize subjects, its initial purpose was to serve as a way to preserve and study the lives of those understood as

saints, as people worthy of remembrance and veneration.

Athanasius of Alexandria's fourth-century biography on St. Anthony set a standard for medieval biographies, followed by Einhard's early ninth-century biography on Charlemagne, the latter based (or modeled) on the earlier works of the Roman biographer, Suetonius. The Renaissance and the religious reformations and wars of the sixteenth century brought a new focus to biography, namely, a focus on the lives of non-saints or political leaders; this is seen in Giorgio Vasari's group biography on the *Lives of Artists* (1550). During the same period, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563) provided the blueprint for biographical dictionaries.

The word "biography" itself emerged only in the late seventeenth century, and the word "biographer" emerged in the early part of the eighteenth century. Biography became tremendously popular in the nineteenth century. Mary Spongberg argues that this genre was a form that women began to utilize quite "enthusiastically." During the nineteenth century, biographies on male subjects served to uphold manly "heroism" and those on female subjects served to uphold womanly "domestic heroism."⁹

Given the popularity of nineteenth-century biography, it is not surprising that it is from this time period that we have the famous quote by Thomas Carlyle: "Rich as we are in biography, a well-written life is almost as rare as a well-spent one." But Carlyle did go on to advocate for more biographers. "There are certainly many more men whose history deserves to be recorded than persons willing and able to record it," Carlyle bemoaned.¹⁰ It is, of course, Carlyle who advanced the "great man" theory of history, a theory that has been largely rebuked in recent years by political, economic or social interpretations of history.¹¹ We also have a popular saying from the nineteenth century, not attributable to anyone as far as I know, but reflective of the time period: "God created men and women, and then the Devil made biographers."¹²

The popularity of biography diminished somewhat through the mid-part of the twentieth century and then re-surged in popularity from the 1960s onward. Contributing to the renewal of biography was the emergence of biographies written by women on women; such biographies actually aimed to provide a more accurate portrayal of women's lives and their roles within historical time periods, rather than gender stylized ones.¹³ Also from this time period we have emerging a clear distinction between popular (or mass) biographies, historical biographies, and literary

biographies. More recently, we see the emergence of postmodern biographies, namely, works that combine biography, autobiography, history, and sometimes travelogues.¹⁴

Given the history of biography and its links with Christian history, it is not surprising that scholars of Christianity still utilize this genre. What I do find surprising, however, is that the biographies that we have researched and published are largely unknown and unread in the wider culture beyond our academic circles and select religious or social communities. This observation forces me to ask several questions, questions for which I have no answers: Is the general populace simply not interested in biographies on religious people or on the intersections of religion, culture, politics, and ethics? Or are religious scholars not writing biographies in ways that can be read by non-specialists or non-religious people?

This, then, points to the heart of my dilemma: While biography thrives within popular culture, and while Christian and religious historians write biographies, what we write is not usually read beyond our limited circles. Is this because of how we write it? Is it because of the subjects on whom we choose to write? Is it because, whether we like it not, biographies on religious subjects might be dismissed as hagiographic even before they are read? Is it because we are not sophisticated enough in our works to draw out of our chosen biographical subjects the complexities, anxieties, quests, and mistakes of a particular time period? Or is it because biographies may be seen as regional histories or, even more critically, as narrow institutional or denominational or confessional histories? Or perhaps we are not publishing with publishers who have good marketing and distribution networks?

To repeat what I said earlier, I have no answers, but my observations regarding biography, contemporary culture, and church history – and the resulting dilemma arising from these observations – have led me to re-examine American historian Barbara Tuchman’s essay entitled “Biography as a Prism of History” first delivered almost thirty years ago.¹⁵ Tuchman discusses the genre of biography as a way to “encapsulate history.”¹⁶ She argues that biography is a valid historical method, much as portraits are valid within paint mediums, and she suggests that scholars who use biography need to think of themselves as artists who have a vision to communicate. Biography as prism, she suggests, needs to “please and interest” readers, and has the power to edify readers in how it may instruct

them on the “increased knowledge of human conduct.” Biography “encompasses the universal in the particular,” she says, and in this way helps readers to comprehend complexities within a scope that is manageable.¹⁷

Tuchman makes the distinction between biography and biographical sketches, but argues, nevertheless, that such genres – if we choose the subjects wisely – can help readers think of the “many layered elements” within a particular time period and culture.¹⁸ Our biographies, however, need to be well written, which for her means that we ought to have fun writing them and that they ought to be page-turners for readers.¹⁹ (I might add here that Tuchman was a popular historian, very successful commercially, but she was not employed by an academic institution.)

Tuchman then addresses some of the controversial issues around biography, namely, who should write them and what to include in them. She makes a distinction between what she calls primary and secondary biographies. Primary biographies are works that are written by biographers who have known their subjects; these biographers, she says, may be able to bring to their subjects a “unique intimacy” and, if they are relatively “honest and perceptive,” they may be able to write better biographies than biographers not acquainted with their subjects. But primary biographers do not have the edge over secondary biographers – which is how most of us as historians would be classified – because they too need to struggle with questions of distortion and content inclusion.²⁰ In her view, no historian – whether a primary or a secondary biographer – ought to view his or her subject with “love and reverence.”²¹

One of the most difficult aspects of writing biography, Tuchman suggests, is to refrain from including too much material and to attempt to give every detail equal weight. She again compares the art of a biographer with that of a portraitist, saying, “A portraitist does not achieve a likeness by giving sleeve buttons and shoelaces equal value to mouth and eyes.” Selectivity is required on the part of the biographer or else readers end up with what she calls “laundry-list biographies.”²² Finally, perhaps as a stand against tabloid and celebrity reveal-all kind of publications, Tuchman is adamant that readers do not need to know about the “subject’s private life” because “insofar as biography is used to illumine history, voyeurism has no place.”²³

Tuchman’s insights both affirm and challenge the work that many of us have done and are doing – or perhaps will do – in the area of

biography and church history. My following comments, therefore, are directed to myself as much as they are directed to anyone else.

First, historians who write biographies need to remember that biography is the means – not the end purpose – of our work. While our focus may be on a particular subject, our work is to use that subject (or subjects, in the case of a group or collective biography) to illuminate a particular historical time period. Our subject must therefore be chosen with careful deliberation. Through the prism of this character – this person – readers ought to learn about a time period in its multiple dimensions. This means that if we write on church leaders, our prism ought to take us to the larger context of Christianity in the society itself. If we write biography as prism, our biographies ought not to be read as regional or denominational or confessional histories. Christianity has been and still is, I suggest, a significant lens through which society can be analyzed, but we – as biographers – are the ones who need to show this to readers. Our own personal perspectives ought to be challenged by interpreting our subjects as prisms of their whole society, not just illuminating the sub-cultures of their religious particularities, affiliations, or identities.

Second, we need to write in such ways that readers will be engaged. This means that our style of communication ought to be based on skills of storytelling. This means that we need to be selective in what we include and what we omit. This means, perhaps, that we will need to write in the style of non-academics. I've been told – whether this is true or not, I'm not sure – that academics are either unable or are not rewarded for interesting and engaging writing. I hope that neither of these comments is true, because it's my sense that interesting writing based on solid historical research is one of the best ways that we can communicate the history of Christianity in Canada. Whether we want to go as far as Tuchman and begin to think of ourselves as artists is another question. While I understand what Tuchman is saying, and while I would like to think of myself as an artist, it's a kind of self-definition that feels presumptuous or audacious to me. Perhaps this is exactly the attitude that Tuchman wants us to push against. I do agree with her, however, in the sense that we need to be aware that we are writing for others to read, enjoy, and learn.

Third, like all historians, we need to be careful not to revere or love our subjects. I don't think Tuchman's comments on this possible downfall mean that we can't have a degree of respect for our subjects or that we can't empathize with them. In fact, empathy is necessary to help us better

understand and interpret the choices and actions of our subjects. Indeed, in a recent essay, British scholar of biographical studies, Richard Holmes, suggests that the ultimate purpose of biography is “*to exercise empathy, to enter imaginatively into another place, another time, another life.*”²⁴ If we want our readers to do this, we ourselves as writers must also engage in empathy. Yet we cannot view our subjects as other, as holy, or as unquestionable. Primary biographers often fall short on this point, but it is also a looming pitfall for secondary biographers. It is, after all, a twenty-first century form of hagiography. While our society clearly needs and desires heroes and heroines of substance, our biographies ought to reflect the lives of real people within their own historical contexts. This does not mean, however, that we trash our subjects; we are responsible for interpreting a life, not for disparaging it. The degree of personal revelations we provide for our readers is, of course, related to larger questions, some of which may deal with sexual identities, ethical concerns, and other possible controversial topics. Yet some of us, myself included, would question Tuchman’s ban on discussing our subjects’ private lives, because such topics may be insightful to the historical era that we wish to examine.

Even if we take into consideration Tuchman’s guidelines, biography as a genre will, I suspect, remain questionable as a real academic endeavor. It does not and should not, after all, be overlaid with theory and it should always be interpretive of theology. It is always susceptible to counter interpretations. The very need for selectivity opens biography to biases of its authors and – perhaps even more importantly – to the biases (or silences) of available source materials. The very subjects chosen may enforce power or ecclesiastical or race or gender or class dynamics that we ourselves personally would not wish to reinforce. And yet, even given these limitations, biography is a good method for scholars to use in exploring the history of Christianity in Canada. It is a way to entice contemporary readers to learn about this aspect of society, and also, if it is done well, it can help contemporary readers practice empathy.

People have an insatiable interest in the lives of other people. So rather than thinking of biographers as being “made by the Devil,” I’d have us remember Carlyle’s insight, namely, that there are many more women and men “whose history deserves to be recorded than persons willing and able to record it.” These people’s lives are important as a way to better understand the past, and therefore, to better live in and understand the present.

Endnotes

1. Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007); and John English, *Citizen of the World: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, vol. 1: 1919-1968 (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2006). For a recent biography on Mandela, see Christina Scott, *Nelson Mandela: A Force for Freedom* (New York: Random House, 2006).
2. John Grogan, *Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World's Worst Dog* (New York: William Morrow, 2005).
3. CSCH member, Gordon Heath, reminded me of the popularity of this genre in the children's market, which often includes biographies on religious people. For example, numerous children's biographies have been written on Kateri Tekakwitha; for a recent study, see Anne E. Neuberger, *Blessed Kateri and the Cross in the Forest* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Catholic Publishing Company, 2003).
4. My biographical publications include *The Women of Hull House: A Study in Spirituality, Vocation, and Friendship* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997); *GEM: The Life of Sister Mac* (Ottawa: Novalis Saint Paul University, 2001); and "Young Man Knowles: Christianity, Politics, and the 'Making of a Better World,'" in *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Marguerite Van Die (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 219-36. I am currently the editor of the forthcoming biographical *Westminster Dictionary of Women in American Religious History*.
5. Mark G. McGowan, *Michael Power: The Struggle to Build the Catholic Church on the Canadian Frontier* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); A. Donald Macleod, *W. Stanford Reid: An Evangelical Calvinist in the Academy* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004); Paul Laverdure, *Brother Reginald: A Poet in Moose Jaw* (Gravelbourg, SK: Redeemer's Voice Press, 2001); Neil Semple, *Faithful Intellect: Samuel S. Nelles and Victoria University* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); Shirley Jane Endicott, *China Diary: The Life of Mary Austin Endicott* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003); Gwen R.P. Norman, *Grace Unfolding: The Radical Mind and Beloved Community of Richard Roberts* (Endicott, ON: United Church Publishing House, 1998); and Stebner, *GEM: The Life of Sister Mac*. The above list is illustrative of recent publications in the area of Christianity and Canada and is not intended to be inclusive.

6. Nancy Knickerbocker, *No Plastic Saint: The Life of Mildred Osterhout Fahrni* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001); and Barbara Roberts, *A Reconstructed World: A Feminist Biography of Gertrude Richardson* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).
7. Marguerite Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada: The Colbys of Carrollcraft* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); Marilyn Färdig Whiteley, *Canadian Methodist Women, 1766-1925* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2005); and Ruth Compton Brower, *New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Mission, 1876-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
8. Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
9. Mary Spongberg, *Writing Women's History Since the Renaissance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 109, 111-12. Spongberg writes: "women engaged enthusiastically with historical writing throughout the nineteenth century . . . to the displeasure of men" and they most often wrote biographies or biographical collections" (109).
10. Thomas Carlyle, "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter" (1827), in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essay*, vol. 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), 6.
11. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1908 [1841]). Carlyle's famous line is "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" (5).
12. Quoted by Gary Scharnhorst, "In Defense of Western Literary Biography," Western Literature Association Presidential Address, 1998 (Banff, Canada). Online at <http://www.usu.edu.westlit/pastpresadd1998.htm>; published in *Western American Literature* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 345-53.
13. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 12.
14. See Charles Montgomery, *The Last Heathen: Encounters with Ghosts and Ancestors in Melanesia* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2004); and Modris Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of our Century* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2000).
15. Barbara Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," in *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 80-90. I first read this essay for a doctoral course on "Biography as History and Theology," taught by Professors Rosemary Skinner Keller and James Stein at Northwestern

University/Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in the fall of 1990. For a recent publication that explores biography as a genre, see Peter France and William St. Clair, ed., *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

16. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 80.
17. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 81.
18. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 83.
19. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 84, 89.
20. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 87.
21. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 87.
22. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 89.
23. Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History," 90.
24. Holmes, "The Proper Study?" 17.

